

An Excerpt from:

Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess
An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology

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Vocation

One of the most enduring questions asked by human beings concerns the purpose of our existence. Why are we here? What are we supposed to do in life? As Christians we know that we are here because God loves us and wants us to be his own. Our chief purpose is to be loved by God and, in response, to believe in him and love him. Yet this is not the complete purpose of human existence. We are also here to love and serve other people. The scriptures continually we are to serve other people in love. This service includes sharing the gospel with them, but it also includes caring for physical needs. One of the most significant ways we serve other people is through vocation.

Many people think of “vocation” only as a synonym for a job, but it is a much broader concept. Vocation means a calling. We do not simply function in various jobs; we are called to do certain things. God calls us to serve in this world; he has a purpose in mind for us. Our vocations can give us pleasure as we carry out meaningful tasks in the world, they can help provide for our own physical needs, and they can help and serve other people. A person’s vocation may include a career, but it is not limited to one job. In fact, all people have multiple vocations. God calls us to various tasks, relationships, and responsibilities. Some vocations come at different times of life. For a time, a person may have the vocation of a student. Later (often simultaneously) they may be an employee, and perhaps even later, an employer of people. All of these are vocations. We may also hold some vocations simultaneously. We may be called to be a member of a family, an employee, a friend of numerous people. All of these are vocations. Seemingly ordinary tasks, jobs, or relationships can be great blessings from God to us and to others when we see them as he does; as vocations or callings. They are opportunities to serve him by serving other people. Matthew 25:37-40 says:

³⁷“Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink?’ ³⁸Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?’ ³⁹When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’⁴⁰“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me! (NLT)

The Vocation of Work

The work that a person does can be a significant part of their identity. When we meet someone new, we often ask, “what do you do?” Our jobs and careers take up a significant portion of our lives, and are part of the contributions that we make to this world. While our careers can be an important part of our identity, we should be careful to recognize that they are only part. Many people have made their entire identity synonymous with their occupation, but

this frequently leads to shallow and unfulfilling lives. Equally shallow, however, is the attitude that sees one's occupation as essentially meaningless or just a means to make money. Such a narrow view fails to see that our careers and our daily activities can be blessings from God.

As you read this, your thoughts may wander to those whose careers involve professional services in the church. Those called to serve as pastors, teachers, or other positions of ministry and service are rightly said to have a divine calling and vocation. God does raise up these servants for ministry in his church. As important and beneficial as their calling is, these are not only careers that are vocations. God works through the ministry of pastors and teachers, but he likewise works through the vocations of bankers, cooks, janitors, sales clerks, and countless other vocations. God calls people to service in many careers. Consider how many vocations and mentioned crafts, musicians, fishermen, judges, kings, tax collectors, soldiers, scribes, tent makers, artists, and many other vocations. In fact, Jesus himself was a carpenter. All of these "jobs" were really vocations: opportunities to serve.

Luther on Vocation

Martin Luther often spoke of the vocations of lay people and noted that their "ordinary" tasks were often more pleasing to God than the works of monks, nuns, and priests, because they carry out these humble tasks in faith.

"The household tasks of a single faithful servant are more pleasing to God than the contemptible worship and fasts of monks, since the servant's tasks are performed in the Spirit and in faith. And the significance and value of works in faith and in the Spirit, not in how great or many they are. So a serving girl, who sweeps the floor and milks the cows, worships God in a beautiful way... A student who listens to his teacher in faith should know that he is doing a precious thing." (Lectures on Genesis Chapter 45:24)

²⁴ So Joseph sent his brothers off, and as they left, he called after them, "Don't quarrel about all this along the way!"

Christians are Called to Productive Work

Christians have always been tempted to consider "church work" or "spiritual tasks" to be more important or more holy than "secular" things. Naturally, we want our priorities to be in order. It doesn't matter how good a job we do in our careers or relationships if we lack faith. Yet Christians are often tempted to ignore or neglect their vocations. From the beginning, some Christians have struggled with the idea that the urgency of Christ's return means that we do not have the time to engage in non-spiritual vocations. Some Christians in the early church stopped working in order to wait for Christ's return. Others, even today, think that secular work should be avoided so that we have more time for spiritual tasks. But the Bible warns that we not flee from our vocations under the guise of spirituality. St. Paul taught the Thessalonians,

⁶ And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from all believers^[a] who live idle lives and don't follow the tradition they received^[b] from us. ⁷ For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you. ⁸ We never accepted food from anyone without paying

for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you.⁹ We certainly had the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to give you an example to follow.¹⁰ Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: “Those unwilling to work will not get to eat.”¹¹ Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people’s business.¹² We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living.¹³ As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.

Earlier Paul had told the same Christians to work with their own hands so they would be respected by the outsiders and not be dependent on others (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). While Christians should gladly and willingly help those in need, Paul is concerned that some may exploit their Christian faith, using it as a pretense for laziness. So even though Paul was an apostle, he also made tents to support himself. This does not mean, however, that we should not pay those working in full-time church vocations. In these and other passages, Paul notes that it is appropriate to compensate those who labor in the church (2 Thessalonians 3:9, 1 Corinthians 9:11). He does warn, however, that we do not hide laziness behind a show of piety.

Our vocations allow us to serve the world in very tangible ways. We should also note that Christian involvement in “secular” vocations is often used by God for very sacred purposes. In addition to the productivity of their vocation, these tasks and careers are often a very effective point of contact between believers and unbelievers. Many people in our world will not visit a church. They may resist a visit from a pastor or church worker. They likely will not read materials sent out by Christian congregations. Yet they may meet and get to know individual Christians as these Christians carry out their vocations. They may see the lives and hear the witness of these believers who serve in vocation. Countless people have heard the gospel and come to faith because of involvement of Christians in various secular callings.

Reference

Mueller, S. P. (2005). *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess. An Introduction to Doctorinal Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.